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ABSTRACT

Composition specialists will find Plato's dialogues, and especially his conception of writing, useful for studying the nature of writing. Plato's strategy, in "Phaedrus" and other dialogues, was to use first person, to conceal himself by using an "I" that he created. In recent times this strategy, using the first person, has been forbidden by many writing teachers, but the writer, through the use of the "I," develops a facility, a fluency in language that teaches the variousness of the "I." By using the first person, the writer discovers the multiplicity of selves which reside in the writing. Plato's model, which he developed in "Phaedrus," is to play at writing rather than to take it seriously. With "Phaedrus," teachers can help students learn to engage in the sort of play allowed only through writing--play in which the writer becomes other people with other opinions and other agenda. In this way writing teachers can use the sort of written texts created by Plato to teach students to write. (Two passages from "Phaedrus" and five references are appended.) (MS)

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"Phaedrus and the First Person"

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Because Plato's dialogues, and especially his conception of writing, "begin" what we now refer to as Western thought, composition specialists would do well to consider what his dialogues indicate about the nature of writing. More particularly, examining what the "I" says and does in Plato's Phaedrus may shed some light on the conundrum which seems to be created. The "I" becomes a voice, a place for Plato to situate himself.

"I" takes two forms in Plato's Phaedrus: Socrates, or the source of knowledge, and Phaedrus, or the destination of knowledge. If Plato can design these didactic dialogues using the first person, then writing teachers have every right to help their students do the same.

Plato's strategy, not only in Phaedrus but also in the other dialogues, is to conceal himself by using an "I" that he created. Teachers who deny the use of the first person in their students' writing should look to the classicism of Plato, see that he did not abhor such a strategy, and allow their students to use it. Writing in the first person allows students to disassociate themselves from the opinions, beliefs, and even rhetorical strategies of the "I" that their texts can create. In other words, the writer, through the use of the "I," develops a facility, a fluency in language that teaches the variousness of the I. By using the first person, the writer discovers the multiplicity of selves which reside in the writing.

Plato has, in fact, created a model for us in Phaedrus. The model is to play at writing rather than to take it seriously. Phaedrus, after all, is one of the more delightful, playful works of literature produced by classical Greece. Clearly Socrates and Phaedrus play around as they threaten each other, tease each other, and make jokes about themselves and their friends. And just as clearly, Plato plays around with us, his readers, in that he tells us not to write while he himself wrote more and better than almost anyone in history. What we can learn from Phaedrus is to help our students learn to engage in the sort of play allowed only through writing--play in which the writer becomes other people with other opinions and other agenda. By using writing to argue that we should not write, Plato creates a form, a sort of opening, that we and our students can benefit from.

This paper will create a dialogue, a Socratic duet, again between Phaedrus and his mentor, Socrates. It will take up where the Phaedrus left off, presuming to extend the conundrum which Plato created. The purpose of the paper will be to play once again with the plaything which Plato created for us--to play again in writing as Plato taught us to play. In particular, the paper will explore ways in which writing teachers can use the sort of written texts created by Plato to teach their own students to write.

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4Cs Paper

Phaedrus, the First Person, and Play

I was checking syllabi for our freshman English program, looking to see that instructors had met with various criteria suggested by our program chair, when the following sentence stopped me cold: "The first person will not be allowed." We, at Northern Illinois University, have no program-wide guidelines for the use of the first person in student writing. I had assumed that individual instructors determined the rightness or wrongness of voice depending on the student's purpose and audience. It's been a year since I first saw this edict, and I'm still agonizing over it. The Fascism of the statement still interests me. Consider what happens with such a rule: The writer of the sentence, in disallowing the students the first person, must disallow herself the same freedom. She represses the "I" of the students as she represses the speaker of the sentence. Yet the sentence speaks repression in its own repression. The sentence disallows itself. The teacher cannot say "I" when she won't allow her students the same privilege.

And so I wonder what makes this teacher forbid the first person and what makes so many other teachers historically predisposed to ban the "I." Possibilities range widely: from the psychological, where the teacher perceives a cognitive growth, a movement from the id to ego to super ego, where the "I" submerges; to the religious, where the "I" becomes sin which is self-serving and wicked; to the political, where the "I"

symbolizes the ultimate in selfism; to the scientific, where "I" undercuts an objective stance. Or yet another possibility: Could the teacher who banned "I" have thought that writing with the first person encourages a sort of auto-eroticism? That writing from the I and to the I amounts to self-stimulation? Her solution is repression: that repression of the first person constitutes a wider range of thought, a more mature world view, a sort of decentering, becomes her pedagogical rationale.

Here I turn to Plato, a teacher in the classical tradition. Werner Jaeger, in his examination of Greek culture and education, Paideia, points out that Plato scorns arbitrary rules when it comes to learning: "He [Plato] belittles ...the formal teaching of the old-fashioned sophists who drummed in rhetoric by rules" (191).

So my question is: Why would a teacher out of hand outlaw the first person when Plato constructed dialogues which of necessity depend upon the "I" ? We can learn from Plato. Let us look again at the dialogue which informs the Phaedrus.

Socrates and Phaedrus are near the end of their sojourn in the country where they have mused over a speech of Lysias' and over two answering speeches by Socrates which in turn deprecate and extoll love; they have toyed with sophistical thought and analyzed rhetoricians. Finally, Socrates gives his recipe for the only sort of writing which would be morally acceptable: a writer must know the Truth about a subject, a writer must classify the subject down to its lowest common denominator, and a writer must know what is suitable to each and every soul. A tall order.

Plato could not have constructed the Phaedrus or any dialogues without the advantage of the first person. Had some outside force proscribed that he write without the subject position, he would have had no voice, no place from which to begin writing. But what Plato does with the "I," the way he shifts who is "I," becomes the source for rhetorical play.

Plato has Socrates admit in the dialogue just mentioned (see the handout, passage I) that he and Phaedrus have been "amusing" themselves. Plato does play and he allows his characters the same sort of enjoyment, an amusement which infects the reader as well.

Johan Huizinga identifies Plato's propensity for play, and even depends on the ancient for a definition of play. After a discussion of classical discourse and sophistry, Huizinga concludes: "It is not only the sophists that play--Socrates and Plato do likewise!" (149). In addition, dialogue "in Plato's hands...is a light, airy thing, quite artificial" (150). And "for as much as he deepened philosophy, he still saw it as a noble game" (151).

Post-structuralists, too, admit the play inherent in Plato. Barthes divides the realm of play into readerly and writerly text and introduces the levels of textual pleasure:

> The text of pleasure is the readerly text, the one we know how to read; the text of ecstasy (jouissance...) is `the text that imposes a state of loss, that discomforts..., unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions...brings to a

crisis his relation with language'" (98)

By such criteria, Plato plays. And he does more: he gives us the text which we think we know how to read, yet by creating the text of ecstasy, jouissance, he discomforts and unsettles us--particularly our pedagogical assumptions. Plato presents the reader with a crisis of language, society, and self. The rhetoric of the text keeps readers coming to it, provides them with a text they can attempt to "solve."

And so what sort of game does Plato construct with the help of the first person singular? A sort of rhetorical hopscotch. A rhetorical, recursive hopscotch, with the pebbles landing on whichever "I" needs to be jumped to.

Plato plays intra and extra textual games as the text of the Phaedrus unfolds, and his choice of who "I" is at any given moment informs the reader of where she is in the play. For instance, because the reader knows something contextually about the nature of dialogues, and maybe specifically about Platonic dialogues, the reader accepts the first level of play: that the first "I" is not a pronoun which refers to Plato. When Phaedrus answers Socrates that "I have been with Lysias...and I am going for a walk outside the walls...that is why I am going in this direction" (21), the reader knows that Plato has hidden himself in the voice of Phaedrus.

As they settle by the riverside, Socrates worms the truth out of Phaedrus: he has brought a copy of Lysias' speech and wants Socrates to hear it. Socrates says: "I have no intention of letting you use me to rehearse on when I might have Lysias himself" (23). The I allows Socrates to say such a thing, allows

Plato to write it, and even allows Socrates to think that he will have Lysias present when he exists only in the words of the written speech.

So the Hopscotch game proceeds: first one foot on Plato, jump, two feet land on the dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus (with some playful allusion to riverbank myths of Oreithyia and Pharmaceia and blustery Boreas) and jump again and land in the speech of Lysias as given by Phaedrus. The "I" gives voice to, becomes the unpresent Lysias who asks the reader to consider the rationale of the non-lover, the disinterested suitor. As the Lysian voice arrives at the end of his discourse, he sums up:

> "Perhaps you may ask whether I advise you to yield indiscriminately to anyone who is not in love. No more, I answer, than the lover would urge you to show such a disposition to all who <u>are</u> in love....I think that I have said enough, but if I have omitted any point that you would like me to touch on, by all means ask me" (30-31/234).

Phaedrus, the younger of the two and the more easily impressed, praises the speech when he becomes the other half of the dialogue once again. Socrates jokes about the glow which spread over him as he watched Phaedrus reading: "I followed your example and joined in the ecstasy, you inspired man," and Phaedrus asks in return, "Do you think that this is a laughing matter?" (31). Their level of play includes a joke now and then. As the dialogue explores the rationales behind Greek homosexual relationships, the reader spots that first level of play:

jouissance. The play becomes the erotic.

The play includes some rhetorical criticism, too, even to the inclusion of where speech makers get their inspiration. Socrates says that maybe Sappho or Anacreon or some prose writers might have said something worthwhile about Lysias' subject, but, "Now I am far too well aware of my own ignorance to suppose that any of these ideas can be my own" (32). We are all intertextual vessels. With very little persuading, Phaedrus finds that Socrates will compose a speech which will best that of Lysias, but to play this game, Socrates orates in the guise of yet another--one with his face covered.

Socrates begins this phase of play by invoking the Muses and assumes the voice of a speaker who will define love and thereby establish his credibility. Socrates becomes another "I," the "once upon a time" "I" of the storyteller. But the "I" of Socrates jumps out of his speechifying persona just as he finishes speaking about eros or passionate love. The Socratic "I" becomes so impassioned speaking about passion, that it has to comment on the sort of speech it is devising. The rhetorical game includes a discussion of the madness which eros brings.

As the storyteller "I" jumps back to the Socratic "I" of the game, Plato adds another level of play: that of the self-reflexive. The speaker speaks of the speech; the text speaks of the text. The writing becomes meta-writing; the dialogue, meta-dialogue.

As Socrates goes on in his inspired madness, he sees that both he and Lysias, in their speeches about love, have offended the Muse. So to right the wrong, he jumps to the legend of

Stesichorus, the historical poet who had to right his own wrong done to Helen. Stesichorus' answer was to compose the following:

> False is this tale. You never
> Went in a ship to sea,
> Nor saw the towers of Troy. (45)

It seems that Stesichorus was playing a self-referential, Epimenidean game of his own. The poem calls itself false. So the statement would seem to undo any text which follows it. "False is this tale" is as repressive in its own way as "The first person will not be allowed" is.

Socrates jumps up from the Stesichorian game into his own. He determines to "deliver a palinode to Love before I suffer any harm for the wrong I have done him" (45). His comment is sensible enough, but if the god were to be insulted by the speeches, how would an additional speech save Socrates from wrath? Finally, in the third love speech, it is madness, madness in love which ties the lover to the spirits and the divine, and makes the one who loves the more superior lover. "This is the aspiration of the true lover, and this, if he succeeds in gaining his object in the way I describe, is the glorious and happy initiation which befalls the beloved when his affections are captured by a friend whom love has made mad" (61).

"This speech, dear God of Love, I offer to thee in reparation as the best and finest palinode that my powers can devise" (66), says Socrates to conclude. But the play goes on: the "I" becomes not just Plato, not just Socrates, but a prayerful voice. "This speech" becomes the dialogue talking

about itself, reflecting upon itself. Phaedrus catches the reverent tone and says, from the place of his "I": "I say Amen to that prayer, Socrates" (67).

Whereupon Socrates and Phaedrus arrive at the game uppermost in Plato's mind: the game of writing vs speech-making. In Grammatology, Derrida discusses the way that Western thought, specifically that of Rousseau and Levi-Strauss, has deprecated writing, while extolling speech-making. Derrida recognizes what it is that Plato does in pitting writing against speech-making: "To write is indeed the only way of keeping or recapturing speech since speech denies itself as it gives itself" (142). Phaedrus understands that Lysias' greatest sin was not speech-making but speech-writing: "So it may be that regard for his reputation will keep him from writing any more" (67). Socrates/Plato is critical of politicians who are "passionately anxious to write speeches and leave compositions behind them" (68), yet it is Plato who writes the words which speak of themselves--the composition which mentions compositions left behind is a composition left behind. The paradox is, of course, that Plato tells us that nothing truly useful or good has or could be accomplished in writing, but he tells this by just the means which he declaims. Play allows Plato to write meta-composition.

So what is Plato doing? He's using the first person as a place to start the game, to initiate the play, and he's using a riddle to keep readers coming to the text, to keep us playing. But consider what is at work in the Phaedrus: in developing the three speeches about erotic love, Plato gives the reader jouissance, and in the reflexivity of the text, he shapes

a model for play: jouer. The play of the constantly shifting "I" unnerves the reader, and the fact of play leads to erotic play, ecstacy. Does Plato design the erotic as metaphor for the larger realm of play? If the reader divides the text--the first half given to an examination of eros, and the second to an examination of rhetoric--Plato's intent becomes somewhat clearer. It looks as though Plato wants it all: he wants love as metaphor for writing, and writing as both ecstasy and play, and speech-making and writing as metaphor for knowing. He wants to use the medium and deprecate it at the same time. Plato demonstrates how hard it is to write by his very act of writing. The writing cannot account for itself, even in its self-reflexiveness.

It is dangerous to read Plato's dialogues as lovely little pastorals, albeit ones with nagging problems. But the text works itself, plays itself, does what it claims to despise. It takes the study of the erotic to the study of the sublime. It tells us that no matter who is "I," a text talks about itself, calls itself into question. A text which is pleasurable, which is jouissance, does this. And the writer who plays does so with the advantage of the first person. And jouer happens.

"The first person will not be allowed" is a sentence which could not constrain the play of our best rhetoric teacher. Plato uses "I" to stand as referent, to become a player in a game. And let us play as he has taught us to play. Would that such a 20th c. teacher allow herself the use of the first person, she could unmask, unrepress herself, and could endorse the writing which begins with the first person. It is with and through the first person

that young writers (and the ancients) find a place from which they can speak. Having found a voice, they can find something to say. And having found something to say, they can say it playfully.

passage 1

Socrates: That Lysias or any other writer, past or future, who claims that clear and permanently valid truth is to be found in a written speech, lays himself open to reproach, whether that reproach is actually levelled at him or not....To be unable to distinguish between...right and wrong, good and evil, is a condition which cannot escape censure....

Phaedrus: Certainly it cannot.

Socrates: To believe...that nothing worth serious attention has ever been written in prose or verse...whereas lucidity and finality and serious importance are to be found only in words...written on the soul of the hearer...--to believe this, I say, and to let all else go is to be the sort of man, Phaedrus, that you and I might well pray that we may both become.

Phaedrus: What you say expresses exactly my own wish and prayer.

Socrates: Then I think we may be content with the literary discussion with which we have been amusing ourselves.

Phaedrus (277-278)

passage 2

Tell me, my dear Phaedrus, do you think, as I do, that I am inspired?

Phaedrus: Undoubtedly you have been carried away by a quite unusual flow of eloquence, Socrates.

Socrates: Be quiet then and listen. This spot seems full of spirits, so do not be surprised if, as my speech goes on, the nymphs take possession of me. In fact, what I am uttering now is almost lyrical. (37-38)

Phaedrus: Very true.

Socrates: You are responsible for this. But listen to what remains; perhaps the madness that is coming upon me may yet be averted. We must leave that to God; our business is to resume the argument addressed to the lad. Phaedrus (238)

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